

## **“REASONINGS SUFFICIENT”: JOSEPH SMITH, THOMAS DICK, AND THE CONTEXT(S) OF EARLY MORMONISM**

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THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF MORMON THOUGHT has long been a topic of deep interest. Indeed, the very concept of “development” and the idea of tracing “intellectual shifts” and “contemporary influences” enlivened many academic works during the period now referred to as the New Mormon History, as historians sought to determine Mormonism’s progression and relationship to its broader context. Ideas were treated as organizational structures, by which a rigid linear development could be traced from one point of classification to the next. Examinations of the broader culture were, for the first time, emphasized, as contemporaries of Joseph Smith were discovered to be making similar theological claims. Utilizing the tools of the New Social History that emphasized facts, categories, and otherwise objective measures of examination, many historians of the 1980s and 1990s often highlighted these new-found parallels to contemporary intellectual sources, no matter how tenuous, and then used these connections to draw conclusions about intellectual dependence and the theological

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concepts that Mormonism subscribed to.<sup>1</sup>

This article will revisit the issue of theological development by focusing on the question of religious influence. Using the example of Thomas Dick, I will briefly outline how the issue of intellectual dependence has been dealt with in past historiography, present the limits and potential pitfalls of these previous approaches, and finally posit what another framework for understanding these issues might be. I will then turn to a demonstration of how this framework may appear when looking at the relationship between Dick and early Mormonism. And finally, I will argue that this new approach will not only help situate early Mormonism within its broader context, but also place emergent Mormon studies within larger and more pertinent academic conversations.

#### THOMAS DICK IN MORMON HISTORIOGRAPHY

There are few demonstrable facts when examining the relationship between Thomas Dick and Joseph Smith. Dick was a contemporary of Smith, a Common Sense quasi-philosopher in Scotland and someone whose theology became demonstrably popular in antebellum America. He was especially useful to religionists who sought a rational defense for their supernatural theologies.<sup>2</sup> Some of Dick's ideas make for interesting comparisons to Smith's theology, specifically with regard to the immortality of the soul, the transitioning nature of matter, and the plurality of worlds. The Mormon Kirtland-era periodical, *Messenger and Advocate*, published three lengthy excerpts of Dick's most important works, *Philosophy of a Future State* and *Philoso-*

<sup>1</sup>See Kendall O. White, Jr., "The Transformation of Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 (Summer 1970): 9-24; Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5, no. 4 (July-August 1980): 24-33; Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God," in Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17-33; Kurt Widmer, *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000); Charles R. Harrell, *This Is My Doctrine: The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>The only scholarly book on Dick thus far is William J. Astore, *Observing God: Thomas Dick, Evangelicalism, and Popular Science in Victorian Britain and America* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2001).

*phy of Religion*, primarily to lend credence to Mormonism's belief in premortal existence.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, several phrases of Joseph Smith (like "economy of God") and Parley Pratt (like "the thinking principle of man" or "spiritual fluid") seem to closely mirror Dick's own terminology.<sup>4</sup> And finally, some of the Scottish philosopher's ideas, such as his notion of an expanding cosmos and the absurdity of annihilation, also find echoes in early LDS literature.<sup>5</sup>

But determining what these similarities mean is a more difficult task. Prefacing the inclusion of Dick's writings, Oliver Cowdery, editor of the *Messenger and Advocate*, explained, "There are reasonings sufficient, we think, to commend it to the attention of the reader." Indeed, there was much in the excerpts of Dick's philosophy for Mormons to embrace. Dick provided a rational defense for the immortality of the soul and a couching of supernatural beliefs in Enlightenment reasoning. His works included references to sophisticated and respected works like Bacon's *Novum Organum* and Newton's *Principia*. Such apologia armed the early Saints with a defense for Joseph Smith's revelations concerning the human spirit, for as much as the early Saints cherished their revelatory doctrines, they were still aware of a surrounding culture that demanded a rational foundation.<sup>6</sup> Merely invoking Dick rhetorically vindicated aspects of their theology as not only coherent but also as shared by one of the period's prominent religionists. Further, Dick's work provided a language of

<sup>3</sup>"Extracts from Dick's Philosophy," *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 3 (December 1836): 423-25; "The Philosophy of Religion," *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 5 (February 1837): 461-63; "The Philosophy of Religion (Concluded from Our Last)," *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 6 (March 1837): 468-69.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Dick's phrase "economy of the universe" is similar to the "economy of God" that Joseph Smith's scribes used when describing the revelation that came to be known as "The Vision" (1981 LDS D&C 76). Revelation, February 16, 1832, Book of Commandments and Revelations, in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books: Facsimile Edition*, Vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of the *Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 243.

<sup>5</sup>For comparisons, see Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 89-92.

<sup>6</sup>For more on early Mormon notions of epistemology and common

progression and transformation that was later employed in describing Mormonism's radical doctrine of theosis.<sup>7</sup> While numerous other intellectual connections have been posited for early Mormonism, Thomas Dick's connection is one of the most substantial due to shared language, familiar themes, and, most importantly, the fact that the early Saints were both well aware of his writings and also willing to use his texts as a defense for their own doctrines.

Scholars have been divided on how to interpret these connections. On the one hand, historians as far back as Fawn Brodie have used Dick, not only as the source for Smith's belief in a premortal existence, but also as the measuring stick from which to understand early Mormonism's entire view of the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> John Brooke continued this thesis in the 1990s, and grouped Dick together with Emmanuel Swedenborg and Andrew Ramsay to form a cadre of metaphysical thinkers who commenced a subtle yet influential shift in Joseph Smith's revelations during the 1830s. Though Brooke held that it was Sidney Rigdon, rather than Smith, who introduced this new obsession with spirits, souls, and cosmic orders, he still maintained an intellectual genealogy that positioned a tenuous link as central to understanding key features of Smith's developing thought.<sup>9</sup> Brooke's framing has remained influential, as this line of identifying Dick as a primary influence on Smith has continued in several recent texts.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, historians skeptical of such connections

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sense, see Benjamin E. Park, "A Uniformity So Complete': Early Mormon Angelology," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 2 (2010): 5-6.

<sup>7</sup>Jordan T. Watkins, "'All of One Species': Parley P. Pratt and the Dialectical Development of Early Mormons' Conceptions of Theosis," in *Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism*, edited by Gregory Armstrong, Dennis Siler, and Matthew J. Grow (Norman, Okla.: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2011): 201-18.

<sup>8</sup>Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 171-72.

<sup>9</sup>John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 204-7.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 6-8; Charles R. Harrell, *The Development of Mormon Theology*, 239-40; Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University

have tried to dismiss Dick as an influence on Smith because of the many differences between the two thinkers. The extreme of this reasoning includes an author dismissing any form of influence due to any perceived divergence, as is common in several works of apologetics, though more subtle examples are found in monographs that either downplay or ignore Dick's relationship with Smith.<sup>11</sup> In this framework, differences outweigh similarities, and the question of Dick's influence fails to match the resultingly narrow narrative. In the first approach, there is rarely any room to consider divergences; in the latter, there is little time spent exploring the possible connections.

There are at least two primary problems with the assumptions upon which these frameworks are predicated. First, they overlook the overall *modus operandi* of Joseph Smith as a thinker specifically and of early Mormonism in general. Smith did not accept or reject entire theological systems; rather, as Terryl Givens argues, Smith incorporated bits and pieces while ignoring others in his attempt to both gather "fragments" of truth as well as to buttress his religious vision.<sup>12</sup> While it is a mistake to identify Dick as the origin of Smith's theology of the soul—Mormon accounts of premortal existence were in print before their use of Dick's work—Dick still provided a larger theological framework in which to place the fragmentary concepts from Smith's early revelations, the very function Oliver Cowdery invoked by inserting Dick's extracts into the *Messenger and Advocate*. Regardless of whether Dick was the originator of many of these ideas generally traced to him, the Saints' familiarity with his writings strengthened, expanded, and provided a reasonable structure and defense for Mormonism's developing theology. A static understanding of Mormon intellectual history that requires an all-or-nothing mindset fails to accommodate the dialogic and dynamic environment of both early Mormonism and of antebellum America.

Second, these traditional scholarly frameworks transform the

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Press, 2007), 160–69.

<sup>11</sup>For apologetic accounts, see William J. Hamblin, Daniel S. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace: Or, Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," *FARMS Review of Books* 6, no. 2 (1994): 3–58; Edward T. Jones, "The Theology of Thomas Dick and Its Possible Relationship to That of Joseph Smith" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>Terryl L. Givens, *Making Mormonism: The History of Mormon Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).



question of influence into a red herring and distract us from equally important issues. Indeed, identifying points of intellectual similarity is only the first step in the process of interpreting and contextualizing early Mormon thought. When looking beyond the bifurcation of influence, more interesting—and significant—questions arise. How, for instance, did Mormonism's belief in the eternal nature of the soul lead to a unique form of embodiment, while Dick's retained a strict sense of dualism? Similarly, why did Mormon notions of premortal existence lead to a glorification of the mortal body, while Dick's led to the classic platonic yearning for a disembodied afterlife? In short, the question should not be limited only to where Mormonism got its ideas, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what Mormons did with them once they received those ideas.

#### RESPONDING TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Both Thomas Dick and Joseph Smith were reacting to a larger religious climate in which traditional supernatural ideas were under assault. The eighteenth century gave rise to a number of public figures that not only challenged but also attempted to deconstruct traditional religious belief. Thomas Paine, who trumpeted the popular belief that "the most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is Reason," argued that the political revolutions that saturated the Atlantic world were to "be followed by a revolution in the system of religion." His main target was the belief in an intervening God, which, he wrote, was nothing more than "human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."<sup>13</sup> Religious believers, then, were put on the defensive and forced to provide rational defenses for their beliefs. "A significant number of American Christians," historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has explained, sought "to absorb the mental habits and disciplines of the Scottish Common-Sense philosophy well into the nineteenth century," as many "scrambled to put themselves on respectable scientific footing."<sup>14</sup> The dawn of the nineteenth century was a new age in religious thought, and supernatural beliefs could no longer be taken for granted.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason*, in Eric Foner, ed., *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 663–65.

<sup>14</sup>Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

Thomas Dick's approach exemplified this response in many ways. Born shortly after the first major factions developed in the Church of Scotland, Dick was raised in a religious environment tinged with the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment. He searched from a young age for the correspondence between new scientific findings and religious truth. He later wrote of being "a boy of about seven or eight years" fascinated with how the natural cosmos demonstrated God's will and being.<sup>15</sup> Educated in both Dundee and the University of Edinburgh, he was well read in the rational theology of thinkers like Thomas Chalmers. Dick's religious philosophy eventually came to encompass all ideas that could be rationally proven—ideas that he believed validated Christianity. "While we ought to recognize and appreciate every portion of divine truth, insofar as we perceive its evidence," he wrote, "it is nevertheless the dictate of an enlightened understanding, that those truths which are of the first importance demand our first and chief attention."<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Dick was especially successful at blending the revealed word found within scripture and the cosmos, an emphasis of many thinkers of the period. The true believer, he explained, must keep "his eye solely on the two Revelations which the Almighty has given to mankind,—THE SYSTEM OF NATURE, and the SACRED RECORDS, just as they stand."<sup>17</sup> Within this framework, science was "nothing else than a rational inquiry into the arrangements and operations of the Almighty, in order to trace the perfections therein displayed."<sup>18</sup> Such an approach sought to bring stability to religion after a century of intellectual challenge and upheaval. Instead of falling prey to the spread of Enlightenment thought, Dick embraced and adapted scientific and philosophical developments to buttress his own supernatural theology.

Because of his persuasive rhetoric and philosophical authority, Dick gained such fame in America that an advertisement boasted, "No foreign writer has been more generally read, on this side of the

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas Dick, *Celestial Scenery; or, the Wonders of the Planetary System Explained; Illustrating the Perfections of Deity and the Plurality of Worlds* (Philadelphia: E. C. and J. Biddle, 1859), 18.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Dick, *Diffusion of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: E. C. and J. Biddle, 1859), 294.

<sup>17</sup>Dick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 6.

<sup>18</sup>Dick, *Diffusion of Knowledge*, 164.

Atlantic, for the last twenty years, than Dr. Thomas Dick."<sup>19</sup> Dick's earliest biographer wrote how "few authors in so important an aim, the enlistment of science and philosophy in the service of religion, have succeeded so well or acquired such popularity."<sup>20</sup> American religionists were searching for a rationalist approach that could strengthen and defend their beliefs, and Dick provided such a standard. That his works were more influential in America, where religious upheaval and ecclesiastical disestablishment caused a need for authority, rather than his native Britain, where foundational divergences between established and dissent churches were well known, demonstrates how Dick's philosophy served a specific and powerful purpose within certain cultural circumstances.

The fledgling LDS Church was among those who turned to Dick for a defense of its religious doctrines, primarily because it faced many of the same questions. By 1836, most of Joseph Smith's revelation texts had already been written, but a majority of what became the distinctive doctrines of Mormonism remained fallow. Mormons were still part of the battle over American religious orthodoxy, defining and defending what authoritative Christian beliefs entailed. By invoking Dick in support of their belief in the soul's eternal nature, they sought to validate their developing theology.

Yet even within the passages that the *Messenger and Advocate* quoted in 1836 are examples of where Thomas Dick and the Mormons diverged. For Dick, the natural and material world served primarily as an analogy—not as a direct correlation—of the eternal soul. Even though he claimed "there does not appear a single instance of annihilation throughout the material system," he still maintained an *ex nihilo* creation that saw all matter and spirit originating with God.<sup>21</sup> Following the tradition of Anglican scholar Joseph Butler, Dick used nature as a metaphor for spiritual meaning. Matter wasn't *really* eternal, but the fact that it *seemed* eternal made it a persuasive rhetorical comparison to his belief in the soul's eternal nature. Though Dick encompassed much

<sup>19</sup>Advertisement for *Webster's Dictionary*, 5, found in the back pages of Joseph Chitty, *A Treatise on Pleading* (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam, 1951).

<sup>20</sup>Robert Chambers, *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (London: Thompson's Edition, 1868), 446.

<sup>21</sup>"Extracts from Dick's Philosophy," 423.



of his day's scientific developments, much of it was used only for analogy or metaphor, as he maintained a traditional Cartesian dualism. "The objects of human knowledge," he wrote, "may be reduced to two classes—the relations of *matter* and the relations of *mind*; or, in other words, the *material* and the *intellectual* universe," and the former was always subservient to and solely created for the latter.<sup>22</sup>

Analogies and metaphors, however, held little authority in early Mormonism. When Joseph Smith spoke of there being no annihilation of matter, he not only meant the idea literally but also followed it to its logical conclusion: that matter had no definite origin, either. "That which has a beginning will surely have an end," Smith famously proclaimed in Nauvoo.<sup>23</sup> Mormonism's cosmos was a literalist—or, perhaps more precisely, a "selective literalist"<sup>24</sup>—depiction of eternal laws, materials, and kingdoms. The earth, stars, and other physical objects were not relegated to figurative or rhetorical speech but were important pieces in understanding an eternal cosmos that existed outside of God's power. Matter was not merely meant as a metaphor for spirit but as an eternal substance with equal weight. "Matter and Spirit are the two great principles of all existence," Parley Pratt explained in the late 1830s, and "every thing animate and inanimate is composed of one or the other, or both of these eternal principles."<sup>25</sup> This belief led to a radical and in many ways unique form of materialism, especially when compared to Dick's primarily spiritual-centered cosmos.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is ironic that many of Dick's passages, meant to be read as figurative, ended up serving as a defense for Mormonism's literalism.

<sup>22</sup>Dick, "The Philosophy of Religion," 461; emphasis Dick's.

<sup>23</sup>Joseph Smith, Sermon, January 5, 1841, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 60.

<sup>24</sup>For "selective literalism," see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 32–36, 65.

<sup>25</sup>Parley P. Pratt, "The Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter," in Parley P. Pratt, *The Millennium, and Other Poems: To Which Is Annexed, A Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter* (New York: W. Molineux, 1840), 105.

<sup>26</sup>I discuss the development and importance of Mormon materialism

Further, for Thomas Dick, the ever-expanding cosmos was a potent image because it demonstrated the omnipotence of God and reminded astronomers that there was a divine origin to the cosmos. Nature *hinted* at divine glory, even if it never fully encapsulated it. As Dick explained, all materials in the world—even human souls—are in existence primarily as “the theatre of [God’s] Omnipotence.”<sup>27</sup> All was subsumed into the power and presence of God. “The material universe exists solely,” he wrote, “in order to afford a sensible manifestation of the great First Cause, and . . . a medium of enjoyment to subordinate intelligences.”<sup>28</sup> The implications of this focus on God’s omnipotence influenced much of Dick’s philosophy, for it constantly hedged the importance and potential of humankind. “We dwell in an obscure corner of God’s empire,” and thus our knowledge of God’s economy is limited.<sup>29</sup>

For Joseph Smith and the first generation of Mormons, though, an extended knowledge of the cosmos brought an opposite result: It lessened the distance between God and humankind. Rather than emphasizing the ontological superiority of God, Smith’s theology came to emphasize their ontological sameness.<sup>30</sup> And rather than highlighting the limited nature of human knowledge, Smith placed the goal of complete and total knowledge at the center of human progression. God was God because He possessed all knowledge, and it was an emulatable trait, rather than an unbridgeable chasm.

But perhaps most importantly, Joseph Smith’s answer to the relationship of divine knowledge and rational truth took its most crucial departure with regard to the very nature of God. While Dick placed a premium on scientific and objective knowledge, he maintained a line between God’s works and God’s image. God “is a spiritual un compounded substance,” he wrote, “and consequently invis-

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in “Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–44.

<sup>27</sup>“Extracts from Dick’s Philosophy,” 425.

<sup>28</sup>Dick, “The Philosophy of Religion,” 461.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>30</sup>For Joseph Smith’s ontology, see Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially chaps. 7–9.

ble to mortal eyes, and impalpable to every other organ of sensation."<sup>31</sup> An impenetrable gap still remained between human reason and divine being. No matter how powerful and important the human intellect was, to relegate Deity to the same status as human reason was to erase all element of transcendent glory. It was more important for God to be "present in every part of infinite space" than to be fully comprehensible.<sup>32</sup> "Could we thoroughly comprehend the depths of his perfections and the grandeur of his empire," Dick summarized in his book on finding "God" in everyday nature, "he would cease to be God, or we would cease to be limited and dependent beings."<sup>33</sup> Dick could not fully embrace hermeticism or naturalism, no matter how tempting it was to elevate individual experience.

Joseph Smith, of course, felt that such concessions and boundaries degraded the human soul and weakened the crucial connection between humanity and Deity. "If men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves," he trumpeted in his famous King Follett Discourse.<sup>34</sup> Certitude played such a crucial role in Smith's theology that there was no room to leave a barrier between human knowledge and divine character. Indeed, salvation *depended* upon this linkage, and Smith's temple rites only furthered the necessity of tangible knowledge. "No one can truly say he knows God," he dictated days before introducing the temple endowment, "until he has handled something, and this can only be in the Holiest of Holies."<sup>35</sup> Smith refused to limit human knowledge to the typical boundaries of metaphysics, he scoffed at degrading human rationality to mere analogies, and he dismissed any lingering conception that human experience was in any way less than fully divine. There would be no compromises in Joseph Smith's religion, no matter what superficial boundaries were placed between rationalism and supernaturalism.

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<sup>31</sup>Dick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 212.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>33</sup>Dick, *Celestial Scenery*, 215.

<sup>34</sup>Joseph Smith, Sermon, April 7, 1844, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 340.

<sup>35</sup>"Book of the Law of the Lord," May 1, 1842, in Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, comps. and eds., *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, 1842–1845: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in Association with the Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2005), 1.

Thus, in answering many of the same cultural and religious questions as Thomas Dick, Joseph Smith followed Dick in some ways but diverged in others. When confronted with a culture that challenged traditional supernatural beliefs, Smith pushed for *more* certainty, not less. Smith was willing to adopt scientific and philosophical theories but showed no interest in being bound by their perceived limitations. The Enlightenment's critiques of religion were to be dealt with directly, adapted, and consumed within the Mormon quest of conquering all knowledge and intelligence. And at the center of that quest was the fundamental linkage between humanity and Deity, a collapse of sacred distance that went beyond allegory and toward divinization. In reacting to a secular world that increasingly bound religion to the tools of rational inquiry, Joseph Smith subsumed all sources of knowledge under the celestialization of the earth and all those who lived therein.

But more importantly, both Smith and Dick represented, at least in part, a period of intellectual and religious tumult in the wake of the Enlightenment. Their responses reflect an environment that yearned for more supernatural certainty in a world of increased secularization. As the Atlantic world continued to take its tenuous steps into modernity, not all were as enthusiastic over the division between sacred and secular knowledge. Especially in America, where the line between "citizen" and "Christian" was still hazy and not clearly defined, questions concerning theological validity and religious epistemology remained of primary importance. That there were as many answers as there were answers highlights the vibrancy of the era. Joseph Smith and Thomas Dick were merely two respondents, yet their presence helps to color the broader picture.

#### A NEW GENERATION OF MORMON SCHOLARSHIP

Mormon scholarship in recent decades has presented itself as increasingly aware of broader cultural contexts and trends, and in many ways it has succeeded. But while broader cultural trends are now often invoked, a persistent scholarly parochialism still frames much of the discussion. For example, Thomas Dick's theology is important only if it actually influenced Joseph Smith, folk magic is significant only if the Smith family's practices are meticulously documented, and freemasonry is useful only in determining whether Mormonism's temple rituals were counterfeited. Put simply, these traditional frameworks render contemporary influences essential *only if* a tangible and



explicit connection can be made. Mormonism, then, remains the central actor in these narratives, thus limiting the role and range of supporting characters.

But this solipsistic view of Mormon history limits our understanding of Mormonism itself as well as the larger culture from which it derived. While it is tempting—whether at a practical, ideological, or devotional level—to construct a framework in which Mormonism is the center of activity, such a picture distorts a reality in which Joseph Smith and his fellow Saints were only a few examples of a much larger population striving to interpret, incorporate, and react to their surrounding culture. A new framework would entail Mormons playing the role as “objects,” rather than “subjects,” in the scholarly narrative, thereby broadening the work’s relevance and reaching larger audiences. Indeed, this type of approach has started to trickle in of late, demonstrated in books by Patrick Mason on Southern identity, David Holland on canonicity in the Early Republic, Jared Farmer on ecohistory in America, and Terryl Givens on premortal existence in Western thought.<sup>36</sup>

This subtle shift of perspective speaks volumes about the potential of Mormon historical studies. The question of whether Thomas Dick influenced Joseph Smith’s understanding of the cosmos becomes much less important than the question of how both thinkers were responding to a post-Enlightenment world that brought supernatural assumptions into doubt. The focus shifts from the unanswerable question of whether Joseph Smith borrowed the three-tiered heaven from Emmanuel Swedenborg to the cultural milieu that encouraged revisions to the traditional understanding of the afterlife. The issue is less whether early Mormonism “stole” elements of Freemasonry rites than in determining how both the Mormon temple and the Masonic lodge exemplify American constructions of communal

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<sup>36</sup>Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jared Farmer, *On Zion’s Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). I borrow the use of “object” and “subject” from Mason, *The Mormon Menace*, 12.



identity. These types of frameworks may force Mormon scholars to read more, and more broadly, as well as rob LDS characters of their uniqueness and the preeminent position, but it will better illuminate both Mormonism itself and its surrounding culture.

And finally, this type of approach addresses issues that speak to a much broader academy, for until Mormon scholars are more willing to join those discussions, they will be circling the same questions while positing the same answers. Indeed, a framework that contextualizes early Mormon history in a way that illuminates its surrounding environment makes Mormon studies much more pertinent to broader scholarship. Now that Mormon studies is demanding a more prominent place at the larger academic table—which is most tangibly seen with the chairs of Mormon Studies at respectable universities—practitioners of Mormon history must make their work more relevant to related fields. To do this, we must cease framing debates over Thomas Dick's influence on Joseph Smith as if solely dependent upon a direct lineage, and begin treating both as representatives of larger issues.

Indeed, Thomas Dick provides a potent example of the issues at stake and serves as an example of a plausible way in which to view the idea of "intellectual influence" in early Mormonism. By being hesitant with wholesale associations as well as wholesale dismissals, and thus actually engaging what these similarities and divergences really meant within the predominantly give-and-take environment of antebellum America, the theological position of the LDS movement becomes increasingly clear. This does not mean presenting early Mormonism as merely another expression of systematic categories, though, or as an entirely unique religious movement created within a vacuum, but rather as part of a larger religious community struggling to answer many of the same questions, deal with a number of the same issues, and react to much of the same intellectual climate.

For the next generation of LDS scholarship, those who wish to explore Mormonism's developing theology must first understand the intellectual air which its early adherents breathed, recognizing the eclectic theological climate of varying degrees of adaptation and agreement, and then attempt to determine the significance of Mormonism's mesh of theological answers. And, once these answers are better understood, it is then crucial to apply them to larger cultural questions and issues, emphasizing how Mormonism related to and

diverged from their larger environment. Indeed, one of the great achievements of the New Mormon History was using broader contexts to better illuminate early Mormon thought. Now it is time to use early Mormon thought to further illuminate its broader contexts.